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Digital Burning and Dodging by Jack and Sue Drafa

Custom photo labs pride themselves on their ability to provide the customer with a superior product. Often it is quality film processing because of stringent adherence to processing specifications or final prints whose results far exceed the customer's expectations. The difference between a normal straight print and a custom print is often the use of special techniques called burning and dodging.

CUSTOM PHOTO LABS that create great custom prints usually have a darkroom technician who is a master of burning and dodging techniques. Their results are amazing considering that their tools consist of cards with cutouts and pieces of shaped cardboard attached to wires.

Life just got easier, thanks to new software tools that help the digital photo lab emulate those traditional photo lab skills. The burning and dodging tools mimic so closely that traditional darkroom technicians can master these digital versions in minutes. They will feel right at home—even the tool icons resemble their traditional counterparts. The burn tool looks like a hand creating a hole to burn added exposure, while the black circle and line indicate blocked exposure in a specific area. Yet, the biggest difference between the digital and traditional versions is that digital gives you greater control.

In Adobe Photoshop, the burn and dodge tools are located together in the floating toolbox. When you press the icon for these tools, you are given the options of burning, dodging, or desaturating using the sponge tool. An options panel at the top of the screen allows you to vary brush size, mode, exposure, and pressure (opacity) of the tool.

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Using the Photoshop burn and dodge tool palette, shadow and burned out problems are easily handled. The areas outside the selected areas (see left) are not affected when the tools are used.

Ready, Set...

Before you consider using any of these tools, you should first adjust the overall appearance of the image using the brightness, contrast, color balance, and gamma controls. Once this is done, you can then analyze which specific areas need the burning or dodging. Often images requiring this type of adjustment are portraits taken in harsh lighting without the aid of fill flash, and portions of the face are in deep shadow.

Zoom in on the area to be modified and adjust the dodge tool to a workable size. There is no rule to this adjustment, since each situation is different. For starters, set the tool to about 20–30 percent of the area you plan to dodge using the brush palette at the top of the screen. You can also create your own brush size and shape from the right side of the brush palette.

For the traditional darkroom technician who uses burning and dodging techniques on both negative and positive printing paper, think of the digital process as a negative paper. If you use the burn tool, the area becomes darker, and dodging makes it lighter. Since most printing is on negative paper, this should be an easy transition.

...Go

Start with the midtone setting of the brush and set the pressure to 20–30 percent. Slowly work your way around the area to be dodged. If it is too much, simply use the Undo or the Step Backward function.

Don't worry about the shadow areas at this time, just concentrate on the midtones. When they look good, switch back to the burn tool, set it to shadows with 20–30 percent pressure and take the shadow areas down until they look correct. Work your way back and forth using the burn and dodge tools, and setting them to highlight, midtone or shadows until you are satisfied.

If you want to restrict your working area, use the select tool found in the tool box to designate those areas you want to concentrate on. If you use the selection method, we recommend the use of the feather tool to blend the edges of your efforts.

Since the areas you are dodging have less image detail than the corresponding areas with lighter densities, you may end up with some noise in the shadow areas. Simply go in with the clone tool and fine-tune those areas by dragging or dropping data from corresponding areas.

Over-Exposure Issues

Over-exposed areas are less common and much harder to fix because often there is little data to work with except pure white. Of course, there will always be some data in the white areas that can be reduced using the burn tool. Set your burn tool to around 20–30 percent of the area size you plan on burning. You may even have to create a brush larger than on the default palette.

Set the brush to midtones with a pressure of 30 percent and start working your way around the area to be burned. When you are happy with the midtones, go back to the dodge tool, set it smaller, and dodge back some of the highlight areas that went too dark. You can limit your work area using the selection tools, just as with the dodge tool.

Once you start working with the burn and dodge tools, you will find that your success will depend on how well you master each tool's features. Just straight burning and dodging isn't always adequate. You have to work both back and forth between both tools using size, pressure, and range. The luxury of backing up and undoing procedures gives you maximum control when editing. Just be sure that when you are done to save the file out under a new name.

The sponge tool, also found in the same toolbox, can be used when a burn or dodge increases or decreases the color saturation when compared to the surrounding areas. You can set size, pressure, and mode with this tool in either the saturate or desaturate mode.

It is actually surprising that more digital editors don't readily use these tools, or realize their importance in digital editing. It took us some time to discover their value, but once we did, our final images improved immensely. When used in a commercial photo lab, it will help push the quality of your digital custom printing one step higher. •

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